

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY ACCRA
AMCONSUL IBADAN
AMEMBASSY LAGOS
AMEMBASSY LOME
AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
AMEMBASSY OUAGADOUGOU
AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L COTONOU 0283

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, DM
SUBJ: ABSENCE OF BENIN PRESIDENT KEREKOU

REF: COTONOU 0113 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: BENIN PRESIDENT KEREKOU'S ABSENCE FROM PUBLIC VIEW
RAISES POSSIBILITY THAT HE MAY BE TOO ILL TO GOVERN. THE SEARCH
FOR A SUCCESSOR COULD LEAD TO MAJOR TEST OF REVOLUTIONARY
REGIME'S VIABILITY. END SUMMARY.

1. GOVERNMENT OF PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BENIN (GPRB) PRESIDENT
MATHIEU KEREKOU HAS NOT ACTIVELY EXERCIZED THE FUNCTIONS OF
PRESIDENT FOR THE PAST FIVE WEEKS. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF TWO
PHOTOGRAPHS APPEARING IN GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED DAILY "EHUZU"
FEB 2 AND 9, KEREKOU HAS NOT BEEN IN PUBLIC EYE. KEREKOU'S
DEPUTY, INDUSTRY AND CRAFTS MIN OHOUENS, HAS BEEN ACTING
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PRESIDENT, PRESIDING OVER SESSIONS OF COUNCIL OF MINISTERS
AND RECEIVING ALL IMPORTANT VISITORS. OHOUENS HAS ALSO BEEN
RECEIVING EXTENSIVE PUBLICITY IN GOVERNMENT MEDIA: IN PAST
NINE CONSECUTIVE ISSUES OF EHUZU OHOUENS' PHOTOGRAPH AND/OR
NAME HAVE APPEARED PROMINENTLY EIGHT TIMES. MEANWHILE, THERE
HAS BEEN NO OFFICIAL MENTION OF KEREKOU.

2. RUMORS, HOWEVER, ARE CIRCULATING IN COTONOU CONCERNING STATE OF KEREKOU'S HEALTH. IT IS PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE THAT KEREKOU HAS NOT BEEN WELL SINCE HIS NEAR-COLLAPSE WHILE GIVING SPEECH AT JAN 16 CLOSING CEREMONIES OF MERCENARY CONFERENCE. ALTHOUGH IT WAS INITIALLY ASSUMED THAT KEREKOU WAS SUFFERING FROM FATIGUE, HIS PROLONGED ABSENCE HAS CAUSED MUCH SPECULATION. ACCORDING TO ONE'S SOURCE OF INFORMATION, KEREKOU IS: (A) SUFFERING FROM SAME DISEASE WHICH KILLED PRESIDENT POMPIDOU (FRENCH COMMUNITY); (B) IS SUFFERING FROM ACUTE CASE OF DIABETES (EDUCATED CIVIL SERVANTS), OR (C) HAS AT LAST BEEN POISONED BY HIS ENEMIES (SOURCE: ORDINARY BENINESE WHO ALWAYS FAVOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES). WHILE WE HAVE NO MEANS AT PRESENT TIME OF DETERMINING WHY PRESIDENT KEREKOU IS NOT ON SCENE, HIS INDISPOSITION MUST BE SERIOUS SINCE IT IS UNLIKELY THAT HE WOULD WILLINGLY ABSENT HIMSELF WHILE GOV'T IS UNDER-GOING INTERNAL FACTIONAL DIFFICULTIES.

3. COMMENT: KEREKOU'S INCAPACITATION ADDS ANOTHER TROUBLESOME ELEMENT TO AN ALREADY FRACTIOUS INTERNAL POLITICAL SITUATION. SINCE THE LOI FUNDAMENTALE (THE NEW CONSTITUTION) HAS BEEN PROMULGATED BUT NEVER IMPLEMENTED THERE ARE NO ORDERLY PROCEDURES FOR TRANSFER OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER. IN THE EVENT THAT KEREKOU MAY NEVER BE ABLE TO RESUME HIS DUTIES -- A CONTINGENCY THAT CANNOT BE RULED OUT -- THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE WILL HAVE TO FIND A MEANS OF DESIGNATING A SUCCESSOR UNTIL THE CONSTITUTION IS PUT INTO EFFECT. THIS WILL NOT BE AN EASY TASK AS THE COMMITTEE'S CHOICE MAY NOT TALLY WITH THE REALITIES OF THE

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ACTUAL SITUATION. OHOUENS, WHOSE REPUTATION FOR CORRUPTION WOULD DISQUALIFY HIM AS CENTRAL COMMITTEE CANDIDATE -- HE WAS FORCED TO RESIGN FROM THE POLITICAL BUREAU IN 1975 BECAUSE OF HIS REPUTATION -- IS NONETHELESS ACTING PRESIDENT AND APPEARS TO ENJOY IT. HE ALSO COMMANDS THE GENDARMERIE, WHICH MAKES HIM A FORMIDABLE FIGURE TO CHALLENGE. THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE'S MOST LIKELY PREFERENCE, INTER MINISTER AZONHIHO, IS POPULAR NEITHER WITH HIS CABINET COLLEAGUES, THE MILITARY NOR THE POPULATION AT LARGE. THUS A COMPROMISE MAY HAVE TO BE FOUND. FOREIGN MINISTER ALLADAYE, AS THE MOST HIGHLY QUALIFIED MILITARY MAN IN BENIN, HAS BEEN MENTIONED AS A POSSIBLE CANDIDATE, BUT HE REMAINS SOMEWHAT OF AN ENIGMA POLITICALLY. OTHER CABINET MEMBERS MAY ALSO HARBOR PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRATION WHICH COULD FURTHER CONFUSE ISSUE. IF KEREKOU DOES NOT RETURN TO POWER SHORTLY, EVEN IN A TITULAR OR SYMBOLIC CAPACITY, THE PRESENT REVOLUTIONARY REGIME MAY FACE THE MOST SERIOUS TEST TO DATE OF ITS VIABILITY.

THOMPSON

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